

The Trouble with Bulls: The *Cacce dei Tori* in Early-Modern Venice

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The city of Venice has been historiographically identified with festival. Venetians staged regular symbolic enactments of the city's piety, beauty, unity, military valour, connection with the sea, and sense of justice, usually exploiting Venice's public squares, boats, bridges, and canals to give these occasions a unique character. One festival, however, the cacce dei tori or baiting of bulls, celebrated none of these virtues and had nothing to do with the sea. Usually found in cities with strong feudal and economic ties to the countryside, such events would seem out of place in a city with no such ties and an impractical environment for large animals. The roots of the cacce dei tori, however, lay more in Venice's intense neighbourhood and factional rivalries than in urban-rural tensions.

Sur le plan historiographique, on identifie la ville de Venise aux festivals. Les Vénitiens faisaient régulièrement des mises en scène symboliques de la piété, de la beauté, de l'unité, de la vaillance militaire, du lieu avec la mer et du sens de la justice de la ville, exploitant habituellement les places publiques, les bateaux, les ponts et les canaux de Venise pour conférer un cachet unique à ces occasions. Un festival, toutefois, le cacce dei tori, ou l'appâtage des taureaux, ne célébrait aucune de ces vertus et n'avait rien à voir avec la mer. De tels événements, qui se déroulaient normalement dans des villes ayant de solides liens féodaux et économiques avec la campagne, paraîtraient incongrus dans une ville ne présentant aucuns liens de la sorte et offrant un milieu inhospitalier pour des animaux de grande taille. Le cacce dei tori tire cependant davantage ses racines des fortes rivalités entre les quartiers et les factions de Venise que des tensions urbano-rurales.

PERHAPS MORE THAN any other community of early modern Europe, Republican Venice has been historiographically identified with festival. From the era of Burckhardt until the present (but especially in the last 20 years) historians have explored the civic and sacred rituals of the *Repubblica Serenissima*, seeking a key to a unique society that to many has remained

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inexplicable when approached just in the more traditional terms of politics or institutions. To develop the city's rich archival sources on public celebration, scholars have adopted the tools and methodologies of social anthropology, seeking to make sense out of what Venetians were saying, to themselves and to the outside world, in their highly ritualized processions, in their staged mingling of religion and statecraft, and in such spectacular nautical ceremonies as the *Festa della Sensa*, or Marriage to the Sea. From several decades of such study has emerged the consensus among social historians that for Venice such public festivals were the catalyst of the ideological glue that held together a rigid and often contradictory social world. Through the calculated use of what Edward Muir has termed "civic ritual", the Venetians staged regular symbolic enactments of those virtues that gave the Republic its claim to be called *La Serenissima*: its piety, beauty, unity, military valour, connection with the sea, and sense of justice.¹ In doing so, they also knew how best to exploit their city's unique topography to give these grand state occasions a unique and striking character, staging their solemn processions against the evocative backdrop of the public squares (*campi*) of the city or upon immense, decorated barges deployed out on the canals and surrounding lagoon.² In this skill at exploiting their own city for ritual purposes, Venetians were renowned among their contemporaries, and not only for their accomplishments with great ceremonials. Even in the city's most informal and plebeian celebrations, from the *regatta* staged on the Grand Canal, the bridge battles or *battaglie sui ponti*, and the clownish building of the human pyramids known as the *forze d'eroles* on down to the most humble parish feast, ordinary Venetians demonstrated their talents at converting the boats, bridges, and waterways that were the essential and mundane infrastructure of their city into the props and ephemeras out of which they built a unique ceremonial world.³

It is therefore surprising to find one Venetian festival that had nothing at all to do with the sea, did not contribute to any agenda of the civic or

1 Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), especially pp. 185–250.

2 Patricia Fortini Brown, "Measured Friendship, Calculated Pomp: The Ceremonial Welcomes of the Venetian Republic" in Barbara Wisch and Susan Scott Munshower, eds., "All the world's a stage..." *Art and Pageantry in the Renaissance and Baroque: Papers in Art History from the Pennsylvania State University*, no. 6 (1990), pp. 399–451; Muir, *Civic Ritual*, pp. 185–250. Compare with the near contemporary ceremonials of Florence in Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York, 1980).

3 On the *battaglie* and their associated neighbourhood festivals, see Robert C. Davis, *The War of the Fists: Popular Culture and Public Violence in Late Renaissance Venice* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), especially pp. 119–127. On the *regatta* and the *forze d'eroles*, see Davis, *The War of the Fists*, p. 170; Ermolao Paoletti, *Il Fiore di Venezia, ossia i Quadri, i Monumenti, le Vedute, ed i Costumi veneziani*, vol. 1 (Venice, 1842), pp. 57–61; Bianca Tamassia Mazzarotto, *Le feste veneziane: i giochi popolari, le cerimonie religiose e di governo* (Florence, 1961), pp. 31–35, 44, 51–52, 74–79; Pompeo Molmenti, *La storia di Venezia nella vita privata*, 7th ed. in 3 vols. (Trieste, 1973), vol. 1, pp. 178–182.

sacred, and, far from drawing structure from Venice's special topography, would seem to have been almost consciously contrary in spirit to the Venetian cityscape. This was the *cacce dei tori*, or baiting of bulls, a public spectacle that, despite its self-evident inappropriateness for a sea-bound society, was said to be "more than any other the most frequent and the most loved" festival held in the city.⁴

The anomaly of bull baiting in Venice becomes evident when considered in the larger context of the caping, baiting, or running of cattle in early modern Italian cities generally. Such taurine events, as ethnographic studies of the practice in present-day Andalusia show, are particularly associated with urban societies that possess strong rural linkages.⁵ Of course, all early modern communities had to bring live cattle within their walls: in the days before refrigeration, there was simply no other way to ensure that beef would arrive unspoiled in the butcher shops. But it was in those cities where feudal ties with the countryside had remained strong and where the economic imperatives of pastoralism continued to penetrate the urban social structure that it was (and still is) most customary to bring bulls, those quintessentially rural and even wild beasts, inside the protective ring of city walls, specifically so that they might be dominated and eventually executed, as a ritual working out of the tensions generated by the competing values of city and countryside.

Thus, in Naples, where Spanish influence was direct and strong, regular *corridas* were staged, with many of the same features as in Spain. In Siena, it was customary to mark important events by holding festive mêlées with animals, both wild and domestic, in the main *piazza*: bulls, oxen, and goats as well as stags and wild boar were baited and slaughtered in a staged celebration that ritually commemorated the city's dominance over every sort of rural denizen.⁶ Perhaps no large Italian city experienced its communal culture as more thoroughly permeated by ruralness than did Rome, where in early modern times more than half the space within the city was given over to orchards and pasture and where one of the strongest local guilds was that of the *bovattieri*, or cattle-breeders. Here, in the capital of Christendom, entire herds of long-horned cattle were regularly driven through the Porta del Popolo, on their way to the local market; it was not at all unusual to see single animals wandering about the streets of the city. Their presence in the heart of urban space gave rise to a host of taurine games, some formal and others less so, as the young men of Rome found it irresistible to mock and torment this striking symbol of never-quite-conquered ruralness. In time, local youths developed their own repertoire of bull leaping, caping, and

4 Michele Battaglia, *Cicalata sulle Cacce di Tori* (Venice, 1844), p. 11.

5 Here and in the analysis of the modern-day Spanish *corrida* that follows, I am particularly indebted to Garry Marvin, *Bullfight* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), especially pp. 66–73 and 128–142.

6 Mario Verdone, "Cacce e giostre taurine nelle città italiane", *Lares*, vol. 29 (1963), pp. 176–183.

baiting, often in direct urban-rural competition with the professional drovers (or *butteri*) who brought the herds in from the country.⁷

Needless to say, in Venice things were very different. Not only was the city uniquely, vociferously wedded to the sea in culture, custom, and topography, but its citizens also lacked all traditional connections with farming and rural ways, with animal husbandry, pastoralism, or droving. The Venetian cityscape was more one of canals than of streets, where goods and people generally moved about primarily by boat.⁸ Such an environment, crisscrossed by narrow alleys, hump-backed stone bridges, and quays that were rarely if ever fenced by guardrails, was no place for large animals such as cattle or horses. Thomas Coryat noted in 1605 how impracticable it would be to go about on horseback in such a city: "Neither the Venetian Gentlemen nor any others can ride horse in the streets of Venice as in other Cities and Townes, because their streets being both very narrow and slippery, in regard they are all paved with smooth bricke, and joyning to the water, the horse would quickly fall into the river, and so drowne both himselfe and his rider."⁹ In fact, this rareness of cattle, sheep, goats, and horses wandering about the streets made Venice walkways uniquely clean among Italian cities of the era, causing more than one visitor to burble enthusiastically about the city's "dainty, smooth neat streets, whereon you may walk most days in a silk stocking and satin slippers, without soiling them".¹⁰

There was, of course, little need for anyone to keep a horse in the city of Venice: persons of quality did quite well with their own private gondolas.¹¹ The city could not do without live cattle, however, for even if Venetians were enthusiastic consumers of fish, there was still a certain demand for beef, which was required for both religious and civic feast days and as a necessary restorative for hard-working men and pregnant or nursing women.¹² Venetians also had to pay for their insistence on having red meat

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 183–188; Martine Boiteux, "Carnaval Annexé : essai de lecture d'une fête romaine" in Bartolomeo Rossetti, *I bulli di Roma* (Rome, 1979), pp. 168–175.

8 On the evolution and management of this unique geographical patrimony, see Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan, "*Sopra le acque salse*" : *espaces, pouvoir, et société à Venise, à la fin du Moyen Âge* (Rome, 1992).

9 Thomas Coryat, *Coryat's Crudities*, vol. 1 (Glasgow, 1905), pp. 364–365.

10 James Howell, *Familiar Letters* (London, 1903), p. 76.

11 On which see Dennis Romano, "The Gondola as a Marker of Station in Venetian Society", *Renaissance Studies*, vol. 8 (1994), pp. 359–374.

12 At the end of the sixteenth century, when Venice had about 150,000 inhabitants, Fynes Moryson observed that the city "spendeth weekly five hundred Oxen and two hundred & fifty Calves, besides great numbers of young Goates, etc." Fynes Moryson, *An Itinerary*, vol. 1 (Glasgow, 1907), p. 90. For the eighteenth century it has been estimated that between 15,000 and 25,000 beeves were brought into Venice's *Dominante* (that is, Venice and its immediate lagoon area), equal to around 300 to 400 per week. These were for the most part brought from ranches on the Dalmatian coast and left on the Lido for some weeks to fatten up before being brought into the slaughtering pen on the edge of town. Jean Georgelin, *Venise au siècle des lumières* (Paris: École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, series Civilisations et Sociétés, no. 41, Mouton, 1978), p. 64.

available.¹³ Separated from the mainland as they were by several miles of open water, they faced the necessity of bringing their cattle to the city a few at a time by boat, a cumbersome and often tricky process. Once arrived in Venice proper, cattle were unloaded and confined in holding pens, usually at the communal slaughterhouses in San Giobbe parish in Cannaregio, at the extreme edge of the city. Here they were left to await their fate, far enough from the built-up centre of the city that they would not offend residents with their sounds and smells.¹⁴

Cattle were thus an unusual sight around the streets of Venice, as rare as a man on horseback. Far from having that easy familiarity with bovines that characterized Romans, Venetians were in fact often quite frightened of them. The visiting Comte de Caylus went so far as to sneer, “[The Venetians] are such poltroons that I have seen a one-year old calf, who was held by two ropes, terrify more than thirty people.”¹⁵ Another observer recalled the occasion when several oxen had once broken loose in the streets and “made every one, despite themselves, run into their houses and shops, many people willingly throwing themselves ... without moderation into boats, [causing] more than a couple to go to the bottom, [leaving] people swimming in the canal, to everyone’s greatest amazement; and still greater was the ruin when [one ox] threw himself in the water [as well].”¹⁶

Under such circumstances, it is rather surprising to find that a cult of taurine sport did arise in Venice, as vigorous as those in any other land-based Italian commune. If, unlike other local festivities, the Venetian *caccia dei tori* owed virtually none of its structure to the city’s special topography, it nevertheless did possess features that made it distinctly Venetian. These idiosyncracies emerge from a tolerably detailed account that survives of how the *caccia* was staged in the final years of the Republic. This is the *Cicalata sulle Cacce di Tori*, written in 1834 by Michele Battaglia, a Venetian poet and folklorist, who had personally witnessed a number of baitings in the

13 Beef (*manzo*) was actually among the cheaper of the red meats available in early modern Venice, typically costing around 8 *soldi* per pound in the mid-seventeenth century. By contrast, lamb (*agnello*) sold for 11 *soldi* and veal (considered appropriate for invalids) for 12, at a time when a skilled carpenter might expect to earn around 50 *soldi* per day. Archivio di Stato di Venezia (hereafter ASV), San Michele in Isola, *busta* 49, *Spese per viveri*; and San Nicolò della Latucha, *busta* 15. On comparable salaries of workers, see Robert C. Davis, *Shipbuilders of the Venetian Arsenal: Workers and Workplace in the Preindustrial City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 28–36.

14 The communal slaughterhouses of Venice existed at least since the mid-seventeenth century, according to a petition to the Ducal College, which mentions abattoirs at both Cannaregio and in the centre of town at the Rialto. See ASV, Collegio, *Suppliche di dentro*, *filza* 28, March 16, 1637. Subsequently the government restricted all butchering to the more peripheral site in Cannaregio. See Giuseppe Tassinì, *Curiosità veneziane, ovvero origini delle denominazioni stradali di Venezia* (Venice, 1933), p. 69; G. G. Fontana, *Manuale all’uso del forestiere in Venezia* (Venice, 1864).

15 Ph.-Cl.-A. de Thubières, Comte de Caylus, *Voyage d’Italie, 1714–1715* (Paris, 1914), p. 117.

16 Venice, Museo Correr, Codici Cicogna, *busta* 3161, “Guerra overo battaglia tra i Nicolotti e Castellani, 1632–1673” (hereafter MCCC 3161), 1639/8. For a discussion of this extensive and unique source on early modern Venetian popular culture, see Davis, *The War of the Fists*, pp. 1–12.

1790s, in the years just before Venice was conquered and the *caccia* outlawed by its conquerors.

Building on Battaglia's account, modern scholars of Venetian popular festival have attempted to reconstruct this lost festival. Many have stressed the special links between the Venetian *cacce dei tori* and Carnival, that season of excess, riot, and social inversion falling in the dead of winter, between Epiphany and Fat Tuesday. Others have distinguished several forms of the event. One took place on the parish level and was put on for local amusement; another much grander version was typically staged in the centre of the city, at Piazza San Marco, before the Ducal Palace, or in the inner sanctum of the Palace courtyard.¹⁷ Those *cacce* that were neighbourhood affairs were usually arranged and paid for by a local patrician, generally as part of a larger family celebration such as a wedding or election to office. For such worthies, the *caccia* was a way both to promote personal or family honour and to amuse their friends and neighbours. Only rarely were such men wealthy enough to pay the bills for one of the grand *cacce dei tori* held in Venice's largest square, Piazza San Marco. These were for the most part state events, put on either for the amusement of visiting dignitaries or in Carnival time, for the prince's wife (the *dogaressa*) and her retinue. For such elaborate affairs, some of which featured a hundred or more bulls, arrangements were normally carried out by the young aristocratic brethren of the *Compagnie della Calza*, who acted in effect as agents and impresarios of the state.¹⁸

From Battaglia's little account¹⁹ emerges a festive event that placed a

17 The following account draws on essays by Battaglia, *Cicalata sulle Cacce di Tori*; Emmanuele Cicogna, *Delle Inscrizioni veneziane* (Venice, 1824–1853), vol. 3, pp. 467–471; Paoletti, *Il Fiore di Venezia*, vol. 1, pp. 64–68; Tassini, *Curiosità veneziane*, p. 402; Tamassia Mazzarotto, *Le feste veneziane*, pp. 1–24; Verdone, “‘Cacce e giostre taurine’”, pp. 173–176; Pino Correnti, *Il Carnevale di Venezia* (Milan, 1968), pp. 47–52; Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 160–166; Lina Padoan Urban, ed., *Il Carnevale veneziano, nelle maschere incise da Francesco Bertelli* (Milan, 1986), pp. 14–16; Adrian Giurgea, “Theatre of the Flesh: The Carnival of Venice and the Theatre of the World” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 1987), pp. 110–122; Asa Boholm, “The *Caccia di tori*: Regeneration in the Venetian Carnival”, *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, vol. 3 (1993), pp. 46–61.

18 Tamassia Mazzarotto, *Le feste veneziane*, pp. 3, 15–16.

19 Although the Venetian *cacce* has been analyzed by a number of modern scholars who have approached the event from different directions and with different interests, ultimately all have based their work almost exclusively on the *Cicalata* of Battaglia or on essays by his contemporaries, Count Cicogna, Paoletti, and Tassini, whose writings on the *cacce* were, in any case, largely and openly borrowed straight from Battaglia. The result has been a curiously closed historiographic loop, with modern historians citing Battaglia, Cicogna, Tassini, or Paoletti as if these scholars were each providing independent material on the event, when for the most part the latter only offer a rehash of Battaglia's original essay, often even copying his phrases. Battaglia's own account was evidently based only on his own memories of *cacce* he had witnessed in the 1790s; when it came to the more grandiose events of the type held in San Marco for such visiting dignitaries as the Elector of Saxony (1740) or the Russian Crown Prince (the *Conte del Nord*, 1782), he drew on the published letters of such onlookers as the Countess Giustiniana di Rosenberg, *Del soggiorno dei Conti del Nord in Venezia in gennaio del 1782* (Vicenza, 1782). There has, to my knowledge, been no attempt to present an analysis of the *cacce* based on archival sources.

high degree of emphasis on ritual, fancy dress, and athletic dexterity while apparently downplaying those rituals of dominance, rough-neck wildness, or urban-rural competition that so featured in taurine sport staged elsewhere in early modern Italy.²⁰ Thus, we learn how a parish notable, having decided to stage a *caccia*, would typically make a round of ceremonial visits, dressed in festive clothing appropriate for the occasion. First, he would pay a call on his parish priest, to make sure that his planned *caccia* would not conflict with any local religious festivities. Having received his priest's blessing and set the day, he would then proceed to the offices of the Council of Ten, where to gain a licence for his baiting he was expected to pay a certain sum that represented either a fee, a bribe, a deposit for potential damages, or perhaps all three. While there, he would also promise the authorities that his *caccia* would take place with suitable "dignity, decorum, and safety". Licence in hand, the promoter could now return to his parish and display the traditional sign of an impending *caccia*: the set of tinsel-wrapped, intersecting metal rings, several feet in diameter and suspended from a long cable that was strung across his local public square, or *campo*. Tinkling together in the breeze, the rings would attract the attention of passersby, who would look up and see the banners which hung down from the cable, announcing the time and location of the event.²¹

Next, the *campo* itself had to be prepared. In the middle of the square state workers would set up a kind of temporary wooden arena, part restraining wall and part bleachers for the audience, tipsily constructed of boards and barrels.²² Enterprising locals would also get into the act. Landlords whose houses fronted on the *campo* reserved viewing space in their windows, balconies, and even rooftops for paying guests. Food vendors and petty entertainers would also descend on the square, setting up booths to sell chestnuts and doughnuts, or putting on punch-and-judy shows, animal acts, or monte games to amuse spectators before and after the spectacle.²³

A day or two before the scheduled event, the bull handlers would be

20 "The Bull Hunts were prepared long in advance under a precise decorum and following traditional rules." Giurgea, "Theatre of the Flesh", pp. 111–112.

21 According to Boholm, "Bullfights ... could be arranged on any week-day except Friday ... [that] did not interfere with any scheduled religious service within the parish" ("The *Caccia di Tori*", p. 49); also Tamassia Mazzarotto, *Le feste veneziane*, pp. 2–3. Some versions have an inflated ball (*un grande pallone*) instead of the intersecting rings. See Paoletti, *Il Fiore di Venezia*, p. 65.

22 According to some scholars, the magistrate responsible for putting up and inspecting the bleachers was the *Provveditori de comun*. Padoan Urban, *Il Carnevale veneziano*, p. 15. This government involvement did not prevent the bleachers from occasionally collapsing under the weight of spectators, however, something noted in almost every modern account. Tamassia Mazzarotto, *Le feste veneziane*, p. 3; Paoletti, *Il Fiore di Venezia*, p. 65; Cicogna, *Delle Inscrizioni veneziane*, vol. 3, p. 467.

23 Tamassia Mazzarotto mentions sellers of spun sugar and those regulars of festive occasions across the centuries, the *fritellari*, or fried dough vendors; Paoletti asserts that an orchestra or band was typically present as well. Tamassia Mazzarotto, *Le feste veneziane*, p. 3; Paoletti, *Il Fiore di Venezia*, p. 63.

chosen. These were for the most part drawn from an ambiguous category of youths known as *cortesani*: a heterogeneous breed of street toughs, journeymen, and shopkeepers' assistants, along with a few noblemen and even an occasional priest. Their most distinctive qualities, according to the journalist Carlo Gozzi, seems to have been that they were "sharp fellows, respected insiders of the Venetian world, braves respected by the commoners for their courage, for their willingness to brawl ... and for knowing how to get by spending little and enjoying much".²⁴ Some of the wealthier *cortesani* may have well have sponsored *cacce* on their own; those who could not afford the pleasure flocked to those who could, hoping to be selected for a role in the upcoming event. The ones fortunate enough to be chosen then raced off to the city abattoir, to vie among themselves for the right to the most ferocious and impressive looking animals. Significantly, these were rarely actual bulls, despite their intimidating size or breadth of horns, but generally simple oxen, or sometimes even cows, waiting to be slaughtered.²⁵ Since the butchers at the slaughterhouse were well aware of how much blood and weight their cattle would lose in the upcoming torment, they typically demanded six to eight *lire* per animal in compensation: presumably this too was paid by the local sponsor.²⁶

The "bull hunt" was generally scheduled to take place in the evening, but onlookers might come to the site much earlier to watch the tricky business of unloading the "bulls" from the boats that had brought them from the slaughterhouse: there was always the possibility that some of the animals might panic and break free, fall in the water, charge the crowd, or pull off some other amusing antics. Once the cattle were ashore, stout ropes were tied to their horns so that their handlers, known as *tiratori*, could manage them. Two ropes were used if, as was normal, there were to be two men to control the "bull"; only one if a handler considered himself strong enough to handle the animal alone: the specially admired *tirator da toro a un cao*.²⁷

Besides the *tiratori* and the cattle, the other main actors in the *caccia dei tori* were dogs, and at the beginning of the event a number of them were to be found under control of their owners, tied up or in cages off to one side of the

24 Carlo Gozzi, *Memorie inutili* (Bari, 1910), vol. 1, p. 113, as quoted in Tamassia Mazzarotto, *Le feste veneziane*, p. 2.

25 Venetians were nothing if not ignorant when it came to pitting themselves against wild beasts. Battaglia recounts the "ridiculous" results of a *corrida* "in the Spanish style", using real bulls, that some of "our best gentlemen" tried to stage in the 1790s. Cicogna, *Delle Inscrizioni veneziane*, vol. 3, p. 470.

26 Unless the sponsor was one of the butchers, as not infrequently happened, especially in the *caccia* that was staged every Carnival in the nearby *Chiovere* (wasteland) of San Giobbe parish. Tamassia Mazzarotto, *Le feste veneziane*, pp. 9–10; Cicogna, *Delle Inscrizioni veneziane*, vol. 3, p. 467.

27 None of the sources, including Battaglia, is altogether clear on who was a *cortesan* and who was a *tiratore*. Presumably the *cortesani* were involved in many of the stunts that went on at these *cacce*, only some of which consisted of dragging the animals around with ropes — the proper activity for the *tiratori*. Verdone, "Cacce e giostre taurine", p. 174; Giurgea, "Theatre of the Flesh", p. 112.

arena, growling and growing excited at the sight and smell of their approaching prey. These were mastiffs or other large hunting breeds that had been raised especially to deal with cattle, usually by the butchers themselves.²⁸ The purpose of the dogs was to put some life into the “bulls” (who were, after all, rather docile by nature) and this they did by charging the hapless animal, singly or in pairs, and trying to bite him, especially on the ears.²⁹

The actual “bull hunt” began with a fanfare of trumpets and drums. After leading their animals in a circuit of the arena for the crowd to admire, the *tiratori*, now specially dressed up in black velvet knee breeches, a scarlet jacket, and a beret or tricorne hat, were ready to start.³⁰ One, or perhaps two or three, *tori* at a time were led to the centre of the ring, and there began the interplay between the *tiratori*, “bulls”, and dogs that characterized the event. The dogs were released and went after their victim: once a hound had clamped down on a “bull’s” ear, he would refuse to let go until either his owner had bitten his tail and squeezed his testicles, or the ear itself had been torn right off.³¹ Not surprisingly, the “bull” would rear, shake his head, and generally lunge at his restraining ropes in trying to trample or gore his tormentors, all of which gave the *tiratori* ample chance to play their animal. First they gave their *toro* a certain amount of slack on their ropes — known as *lazo ai cai* — so that he could charge more freely and get his head down the better to defend himself: the so-called *toro molao*. This was when the “bull” would most excite the crowd, running almost loose and sometimes — crazed with pain — charging into the spectators. In the process, the *tiratori* would demonstrate their own *bravura* by pulling the ropes taut, yanking their “bull’s” head back around forcibly, or even bringing him to his knees. It is not altogether clear from Battaglia’s account whether the main aim of the *tiratori* was to help or hinder the ox in his battle with the dogs: some later commentators have concluded that, by pulling the animal’s horns this way and that, they were giving their charge a better chance to defend himself; others have claimed just the opposite — that the *tiratori* sought to impede their “bull’s” attempts at self-defence, in

28 “Gros dogues”, according to Jean-Baptiste du Val, *Les Remarques triennales* (Algiers, 1955), p. 48.

“There [at the abattoir] the butchers furnished themselves with special dogs of ferocious Corsican or English breeds.... Others, especially Great Danes, were the private property of the *cortesani*.” Tamassia Mazzarotto, *Le feste veneziane*, p. 4. A seventeenth-century English visitor seemingly saw things differently, however: “Another day I was at the Baiting of the Bulls, or rather Oxen ... a Sport much valued, though they wanted some of our *English Bull-dogs* to have it in perfection.” William Bromley, *Remarks made in Travels through France & Italy, with many Publick Inscriptions* (London, 1693), p. 88–89.

29 Butchers trained their “bull dogs” (*cani da toro*) as puppies by offering them “the heads [of cattle] freshly cut off and still warm”, rewarding those that “showed readiness to bite the ear and, having bitten, remained attached”. Cicogna, *Delle Inscrizioni veneziane*, vol. 3, p. 468. Attempts to agitate the cattle could extend to attaching fireworks to their horns beforehand, although sometimes that had the opposite effect, “the explosions and smoke often leaving the ox more immobile than ever”. Paoletti, *Il Fiore di Venezia*, p. 65.

30 Padoan Urban, *Il Carnevale veneziano*, p. 14.

31 Battaglia, *Cicalata*, pp. 28–32; Cicogna, *Delle Inscrizioni veneziane*, vol. 3, p. 468.

the interest of both wearing him out sooner and protecting the dogs, who were after all often quite valuable.³² Cicogna does assert that the audience applauded the animals as much as or more than the *tiratori*, “cheering to the skies” both when a dog managed to attach itself solidly to an undefended ear and when a particularly dextrous “bull” succeeded in tossing one of his tormentors into the air and skewering him with his horn.³³

After three or four of these *molae* had given them, the dogs, and their *toro* a chance to show their respective abilities, the *tiratori* would take their animal from the ring.³⁴ If he were in very bad shape and had lost a great deal of blood, the “bull” would be dragged back to the boat and rowed away immediately; he might even be decapitated on the spot, with a single blow from a two-handed sword.³⁵

If, however, he were still reasonably intact, the *tiratori* might take their animal to nearby courtyards where they would put on a show under the window or balcony of their wives, fiancées, or sweethearts, as a declaration of affection.³⁶ This making the rounds of the parish was known in Venetian as *andar zo de la festa* and effectively constituted the second and certainly more artistic part of the event. Very likely, part of the rationale behind the initial baiting of the animal with dogs was to wear him out to the point where he might offer a more malleable object for the routines of the *tiratori*, much like a bull in a modern Spanish *corrida* is first wounded, bled, and weakened by the *picadores* before he goes to his final encounter with the *matador*.³⁷ In the Venetian *cacce*, however, the aim of the baiting had not been to weaken the “bull” in order to finish him off with a sword in the Spanish style. Rather, the *tiratori* employed their ropes as much to play with their victim as to dominate it. Some would bring their animal to its knees, with a single jerk if possible; others would instead work out comic routines that involved lifting themselves on the “bull’s” horns, leaping up onto its back, or clowning around by pulling the animal’s tail.³⁸ In earlier times, it appears that a *cortesana* might end up parading “his” bull all over his parish, some-

32 Giurgea, “Theatre of the Flesh”, p. 114; Paoletti, *Il Fiore di Venezia*, p. 66.

33 Cicogna, *Delle Inscrizioni veneziane*, vol. 3, p. 468; Battaglia, *Cicalata*, p. 28; Correnti, *Il Carnevale di Venezia*, p. 50.

34 Cash prizes were evidently sometimes given to the owners of the most tenacious and aggressive dogs. Padoan Urban, *Il Carnevale veneziano*, p. 16.

35 Some have asserted a programme here rather closer to the finale of the modern Spanish *corrida*, where the *matador* is expected to kill his bull with a single, clean thrust. Giurgea, “Theatre of the Flesh”, p. 115.

36 “And what woman would not have loved such a demonstration of attention?” Paoletti, *Il Fiore di Venezia*, p. 66.

37 Marvin, *Bullfight*, pp. 21–32.

38 “In this game ... the principal [aim] was to bring down the animal with but a single tug, [at which] the cries of applause would then rise to the skies, and one would see the lover of the brave *Tiratore* dry with her apron her tears of tenderness. Sometimes, however, the upending blow [*il colpo di fermata*] would go wrong, bringing down instead some of the *tiratori*: whence there would be jeers and displeasure.” Cicogna, *Delle Inscrizioni veneziane*, vol. 3, p. 468.

times giving one of the ropes to a real courtesan — that is to one of Venice's high-class prostitutes who might have attracted his fancy.³⁹

Here most descriptions of Venice's parish *caccia dei tori* generally conclude.⁴⁰ As to why Venetians were so attracted to this very anomalous festival, Battaglia and his contemporaries did not speculate, beyond noting that the Venetii, the original inhabitants of the mainland, used to delight in the practice in pre-Roman times.⁴¹ If they were vague on the rationale behind Venetian bull baiting, these nineteenth-century folklorists, poets, and essayists who wrote about the *cacce* were at least clear about the social values it reflected. Each, in his way, asserted that the ritual was a positive and not a squalid pastime, particularly in the way it reflected what was good about the vanished Republic and what made it worth commemorating: patrician largess, public decorum, elaborate costumes, and the ritualized bravery of young Venetian males, all carried out under the watchful guidance of a paternalistic state.

Although these explications probably tell us less about what the *caccia dei tori* meant to its participants than about how intensely Venetian intellectuals of this generation romanticized and idealized the lost *Repubblica Serenissima*, there still has been little effort in the subsequent century and a half to try to offer some alternative explanation as to what a rurally linked festival such as this was doing in Venice. Instead, those scholars who would write the history of the Republic through its festive life have tended without exception to accept this synchronic, nineteenth-century assumption that the festival made up yet another thread in the harmonious fabric of Venetian social interaction, tacitly assuming that, like other quirky, but poorly understood expressions of the local culture (and there were many), the *caccia* must in some way have represented at its base yet another facet of the so-called Myth of Venice: the islanders' communal sense of their Republic's uniqueness, perfection, and historic mission.⁴²

It has thus been asserted that the whole "point" of the *caccia* lay in giving its promoters, the local patricians, a chance to parade their bloodied "bulls" under balconies filled with admiring womenfolk, thereby demonstrating their personal virility before their fiancées, and, by extension, affirming the potency of their noble lineages before the eyes of the entire city.⁴³ There have also been attempts, in stressing the carnivalesque nature of the neighbourhood *caccia dei tori*, to link it to the spectacle staged in the courtyard of the Ducal Palace on the last Sunday of Carnival, where an ox and twelve pigs were run, baited, and eventually decapitated in a burlesque,

39 Giacomo Franco, "Molada per la città" in *Habiti d'Huomeni et Donne Venetiane* (Venice, 1610).

40 Although some go on to devote much additional attention to the state-sponsored *cacce* in Piazza San Marco.

41 Battaglia, *Cicalata*, pp. 10–12; Cicogna, *Delle Inscrizioni veneziane*, vol. 3, p. 467.

42 On the so-called Myth of Venice, see Dennis Romano, *Patricians and Popolani: The Social Foundations of the Renaissance State* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 4, 151–152.

43 Boholm, "The *Caccia di Tori*", pp. 50–55.

symbolic replaying of a key event in the Myth of Venice: the victory of the infant Republic over its rivals in nearby Aquilea.⁴⁴

Neither of these interpretations really seems to comprehend the underlying spirit of the parish *cacce*, however. The former founders on confusing the local elites, who paid for the *cacce*, with the plebeian *tiratori*, who baited the bulls and paraded them afterwards.⁴⁵ The latter confounds two events that are superficially similar but structurally quite different: while both involved the tormenting of cattle, the Carnival event appears to have been little more than a *mêlée* of butchery, played out without ropes or routines of control.⁴⁶

Archival evidence suggests, moreover, that, far from representing another coded expression of Venice's vaunted civic harmony, the *caccia dei tori*, in its original form and spirit, was very much a manifestation of the city's intense and often destructive factionalism. It was a spirit of parochialism against which the patrician state waged an ongoing, if intermittent, war for centuries, in the name of civic order and centralized control. Not a few popular festivals of great antiquity fell by the wayside or were suppressed outright during this secular campaign.⁴⁷ Others, like the *caccia dei tori*, were evidently "tamed": their original ritual aims and content shifted to more acceptable ends, even as their manifestations were systematically limited in time and space. In the process, the fractious forerunner of the *caccia* — a disruptive, highly contentious, but still somewhat shadowy popular ritual — was converted into the stylized and rather insipid affair that Battaglia would witness at the end of the Republic.⁴⁸

The antagonistic roots of the Venetian *caccia* emerge from the city's police records, chronicles, and news accounts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, sources which, although scanty, clearly indicate that the event once played a significant role in Venice's parish rivalries and factional hostilities. As such, bull baiting had a very different function in Venice than in such agriculturally linked communes as Siena or Rome, where urban-rural rivalries were being worked out through the agency of animals as symbols.

44 Giurgea, "Theatre of the Flesh", pp. 116–122; Muir, *Civic Ritual*, pp. 160–166, 177–178.

45 A confusion not helped by the fact that, as Gozzi observed, not a few *cortesani* were of noble birth, and it was the *cortesani* who generally took on the role of *tiratori*. Battaglia and his nineteenth-century successors make it clear, however, that "indeed, only rarely would some of our gentlemen enter [into the ring] ... to serve as *Nobile Tiratori*"; since it would seem that only the *tiratori* who had mastered the ox had the privilege of parading their animal outside the ring, then presumably this too was rarely done by nobles. Cicogna, *Delle Inscrizioni veneziane*, vol. 3, p. 468; Padoan Urban, *Il Carnevale veneziano*, p. 14.

46 Although sometimes in the Ducal Courtyard the butchers in charge would try to leap on the neck of their animals or pull them around by the tail. Cicogna, *Delle Inscrizioni veneziane*, vol. 3, p. 469.

47 Often noted in this regard was the parish-based "Festival of the Twelve Marys", but also suppressed (although with more difficulty) were the "wars of the sticks" and the "wars of the fists". Muir, *Civic Ritual*, pp. 139–156; Davis, *The War of the Fists*, pp. 49–53, 165–171.

48 Even those who study Venetian festival have complained of "a certain monotony" in the repetitive and formalistic event as it has been depicted from Battaglia onward. Verdone, "Cacce e giostre taurine", p. 175, n. 2.

In the lagoon city, by contrast, the *caccia dei tori* derived its force from the very alienness of these animals to local culture.

From the edicts of the Council of Ten, Venice's primary policing authority, it soon becomes apparent that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the *cacce dei tori* were often highly mobile affairs, where participants were not simply baiting bulls within arenas in the public *campo*, but were also "running with bulls through the streets, alleys, or quays".⁴⁹ Although evidence for this earlier period is thin, cattle would seem to have been moved about the city primarily to get them to a parish fête: a whole roast ox or bull formed the centrepiece of many a neighbourhood feast.⁵⁰ It was in getting the animal from the communal slaughterhouse to its final destination at the local *campo* that butchers' boys and parish youths apparently developed their taste for noisily charging along Venice's narrow alleys. These young men and indeed all *cortesani* would have been well aware of the disruptive (and thus potentially amusing) possibilities in setting large animals loose in Venice. Streets that were already notoriously tight and twisting were often further crowded with workshops, laundry, food displays, and ordinary passersby, leaving little enough space for the occasional cow, horse, goat, or even pig to get through.⁵¹ If the animals could be panicked, the results were predictable and exciting for young men with time on their hands. Carlo Gozzi himself was quite familiar with such *cortesani* pranks, recalling with real relish in the 1790s how, 40 years earlier, he and some other bored young militiamen stationed together in the Venetian outpost of Spalato had arranged one night for a stable-full of 50 horses to stampede through that city, causing "people to jump from their beds, fearing maybe it was a Turkish raid, crying from their windows, 'What the devil is this, who is there, who goes there?'"⁵²

The disruptive possibilities of cattle running loose in these narrow streets, intensified by Venetians' notorious nervousness around large animals of all sorts, was seized upon by local youths not simply for amusement but also for aggressive ends.⁵³ Like present-day Siena, early modern Venice was fragmented into a congeries of highly competitive neighbourhoods, each of which was deeply committed to intense rivalries with its enemies, usually identified either as those of the immediate, neighbouring parish or of the

49 ASV, Consiglio dei Dieci, *Proclami* (hereafter ASV, CDP), filza 3, January 26, 1526.

50 Tamassia Mazzarotto, *Le feste veneziane*, pp. 119–125.

51 "They also have a barbarous custom of hunting bulls about the streets and piazzas, which is very dangerous, the passages being generally narrow." John Evelyn, *Diary and Correspondence*, vol. 1 (London, 1854), p. 213.

52 Gozzi, *Memorie inutili*, vol. 1, p. 82.

53 Venetians are notorious among other Italians to this day for being incompetent motorists, a reputation that traces its roots back to their lack of experience in riding horses. As long ago as 1715, the Comte de Caylus said of them: "Those that take the risk of mounting even the most placid beast that you can imagine, do not forget to make a great sign of the cross before exposing themselves to such an enormous danger." Comte de Caylus, *Voyage d'Italie, 1714–1715*, p. 120.

opposing, city-wide faction.⁵⁴ During their festivities held to celebrate and enhance the neighbourhood, its local saints, or its most respected patricians, parishioners never missed a chance to heap insults on their traditional, neighbouring opponents. One of the best ways to do so seems to have been to “hold the *festa dei tori* near their [parish] borders ... [for] the greater disgrace [*obbrobio*] of their rivals”.⁵⁵

Here the original connection between the *caccia dei tori*, or baiting of bulls, and *correre coi tori*, or running with bulls, becomes explicit. Once the butcher’s dogs had been set upon it to the point where the roped animal was completely panicked, it was possible to run it through the streets of the enemy parish. Noisy “shaming races” were already an integral part of factional rivalries in Venice. Called *scorrerie*, these incursions consisted of youths running through their opponents’ territory, shouting and banging on shutters with rocks to demonstrate publicly that their enemy could not control or protect his own space.⁵⁶ It would have taken no great imagination to see the possibilities in adding a castrated “bull” to the party. Leading the charge down the narrow streets, bellowing and bleeding under the onslaught of a pack of large dogs, half dragging and half insidiously guided by a pair of festively dressed toughs — who were in their turn followed by a jeering mob of raiders — the “bulls” would have hit a rival parish like a bomb. As residents ran for cover “without knowing in what hole to hide themselves”, the intended message of violation was driven home all the more clearly.⁵⁷

It is also worth noting that these aggressive, home-grown *cacce* were fall events. Unlike the baitings that Battaglia could recall, they had little to do with the ribaldries and symbolic excesses of Carnival season and a great deal with casting shame and building up factional hatreds. They were natural products of the intense cycle of parish-level festivities that were traditionally held in Venice between mid-August and Christmas: the time for highly aggressive celebrations that found their other major outlet in the great bridge battles known as the wars of the fists. Why these battles should have been restricted to just the fall months is unclear, but it is certain that both popular custom and public law kept this season for bridge wars — and the

54 Alan Dundes and Alessandro Falassi, *La Terra in Piazza: An Interpretation of the Palio of Siena* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 12–45; Sydel Silverman, “The Palio of Siena: Game, Ritual, or Politics?” in Silvia Zimmerman and Ronald Weissman, eds., *Urban Life in the Renaissance* (Newark, DE, 1989), pp. 224–239. Whereas Siena was divided into its seventeen *contrade*, which grouped together in shifting alliances, seventeenth-century Venice was split between just two great factions known as the Nicolotti and the Castellani, built in their turn on several dozen neighbourhood and occupational groups. Davis, *The War of the Fists*, pp. 39–44, 117–127.

55 MCCC 3161, 1633/5.

56 On Venetian *scorrerie*, see Davis, *The War of the Fists*, pp. 19, 59, 79, 111, 118; on the etiology of shaming races in pre-modern Italy generally, see Richard Trexler, “Correre la terra: Collective Insults in the Late Middle Ages”, *Mélanges de l’École Française de Rome, Moyen Âge-Temps Modernes*, vol. 96 (1984), pp. 845–902.

57 MCCC 3161, 1632/6.

cacce dei tori so often associated with them — rigidly separated from the wintertime celebrations of Carnival.⁵⁸ These autumn *cacce* were relatively spontaneous, unstructured affairs, started by local youths who had little interest in securing a licence from the Ten, much less checking first with their parish priest to ask permission. On the contrary, many would simply steal cattle from the slaughterhouses *a viva forza*, “against the will of the butchers, the owners of the oxen, or their agents”.⁵⁹ Others would go so far as to row out into the open lagoon and hijack the boats that were transporting the animals from the mainland, bundling off their prize and bringing the hapless animal to the quays of their enemy’s parish to enhance their raid.⁶⁰ Often their raucous forays escalated into still greater disruption, as rival bands of youths might well counterattack them in mid-raid, in an attempt to steal away their “bull”.⁶¹ According to a complaint lodged with the Ten, such *cacce slegale* were becoming so disruptive by 1664 that they threatened to interrupt the normal distribution of meat about the city and cause “discontent among the people”.⁶²

At their core, then, taurine games in Venice were originally far less about the ritual pitting of man against bull, with its attendant symbolic drama of competing urban and rural cultures, than about a ritual conflict between men, where the protagonists availed themselves of bulls, cows, or oxen as another weapon in their factional rivalries. If these hapless animals had symbolic import among these contending gangs, it would seem to have been their very inappropriateness: the way in which, as degraded and often castrated beasts hijacked from the faceless countryside, they could be used to violate enemy territory with their improper and unseemly presence. It was much in this way that factional festivities made use of dance, placards, effigy figures, and even gondola cabins for jarring, inappropriate, and ultimately shaming ends.⁶³

Significantly, the authorities in Venice tried to channel rather than completely abolish the factional excesses associated with these original *cacce dei tori*. The running of “bulls” through the city was harshly condemned, it is true: those who had to pass with animals along the “streets, alleys, or quays” were to “do so going quietly, above all holding on to the ropes”.⁶⁴

58 “It not being the custom to make wars during the time of Carnival ... since masks [will have] tempered the ardor and the arrogance of the people.” MCCC 3161, 1633/8, 1641/4, 1649/14, 1668/33, 1669/20.

59 ASV, CDP, *filza* 14, July 10, 1614.

60 ASV, CDP, *filza* 21, September 17, 1638.

61 “[As] Scaramuzza and Dorigo the Baker, Nicolotti, were running a bull along the Zattere, the [animal] was taken from their hand by the force of arms and pike, and led away by Francesco Monte, Cul de Favetta [‘Bean Ass’] and other Castellani, who also gravely wounded the said Baker with a pike thrust in the back; from which arose that, after many Nicolotti got together, they took themselves to the house of said Monte in the Borgo of San Trovaso [parish], and breaking down the door, they entered the house and carried off the bull.” MCCC 3161, 1637/12.

62 ASV, Consiglio di Dieci, *Suppliche*, busta 4, October 6, 1664.

63 Davis, *The War of the Fists*, pp. 63, 99–100.

64 ASV, CDP, *filza* 3, January 26, 1537.

Yet “baiting with dogs” would be allowed in the parish *campi*, as long as the proper permits were secured. Restricting as much as possible the invasive *scorrerie*, the Council of Ten also sought to defuse the factional nature of the event by forcibly moving it to “those special days of Carnival, [when it is] according to ancient custom usually permitted”, the better to ensure that inversion and buffoonery might become the predominant themes of the festival, rather than conflict and rivalry.⁶⁵ Not that it was so easy to deprive the people of Venice of what had by this time become a favourite component in their factional rivalries. Even after the *cacce* had been successfully restricted to inside the parish boundaries, and thus presumably less open to use as a tool in factional aggressions, the *tiratori* still made a point of coming to the event sporting a hat in the colours of their faction, stressing the continuing competitive nature of the whole contest.⁶⁶ Likewise, complaints continued to be made throughout the seventeenth century about “bulls” being run out of season, and even in the last decades of the Republic, young bloods managed to find a loophole in the rules and on the evening of Fat Tuesday would regularly go “stark mad, driving loose bulls through the streets” around the Rialto Bridge.⁶⁷

To a large extent, elite authorities seeking to impose harmony on the often fractious popular culture of Venice succeeded, although at the cost of producing the rather pointless and insipid *caccia* that Battaglia witnessed and recorded. Closely hedged in by the threat of rigorous reprisals (in fact, over the centuries the punishments for misbehaving with bulls in the city streets escalated from a month in jail up to a year and a half at the galleys), the *caccia dei tori* became a largely self-referential game where animals were tormented and tortured each other. It was an event that in its final days appeared to lack much ability to engage its audience or participants very deeply, for it spoke to them neither of a competing countryside nor of their own rivalries, but only of buffoonery. The seeming pointlessness of the later *cacce dei tori* has made it relatively easy for those modern scholars, with only Battaglia’s account to go by and with little sense of the initial inspiration behind the *caccia*, to condemn the event as nothing more than “a cruel torment of defenseless animals”.⁶⁸ It also made it easy, in the end, for the Austrians who took over the Republic to suppress this once wildly popular expression of factional rivalry, in the name of maintaining order on the streets of a conquered Venice.

65 ASV, CDP, *filza* 25, July 13, 1649.

66 Many who have written on the *cacce* have noted the presence of factional colours (“black if the combatants were Nicolotti, red if Castellani”) without, however, questioning their significance in this context. Padoan Urban, *Il Carnevale veneziano*, p. 14; Tamassia Mazzarotto, *Le feste veneziane*, p. 4.

67 “On the last day of Carnival they grow from merry to stark mad, driving loose bulls through the streets.” John Reresby, *Memoirs and Travels*, p. 59.

68 Padoan Urban, *Il Carnevale veneziano*, p. 16.